

The Northern Lights II

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****Summary:**** Amidst the ruin of a battle, Imrahil meets a king and a friend.

****Disclaimer:**** Not one northern light.

This is a sequel to the _"Northern Lights",_ a story I wrote for the Teitho challenge. This sequel was written after an overwhelming response to see more Imrahil and Aragorn.

All of my stories are interconnected unless stated otherwise. You do not need to read one to understand the other, though for this one, I advise reading _"Northern Lights"._

Enjoy!

****~S~****

The stench of death covered the city like a heavy dense fog. Despair and grief followed it.

"We survived," Erchirion whispered in relief. His second child, a grown man, sagged against the wall of a fallen building in pure exhaustion. His sword was still clasped loosely by the hilt, its point dragging over the stones. He added, "Barely."

Imrahil inclined his head in silent agreement and clapped his hand against his son's shoulder.

"Go," Imrahil said in a gentle voice of a father. "Get some rest. You earned it." Erchirion opened his mouth to begin a protest but Imrahil shook his head. "I will have no excuses. Go."

Erchirion seemed as if he had something to say but thought better of it. Instead he nodded wordlessly and trudged away, his sword still dangling in his grasp.

Exhaustion threatened to overwhelm Imrahil as well. He wanted nothing more than to roll in his own cloak in a corner and drift off to sleep. Washing away the blood did not even matter. But there was still work to be done. He still needed to welcome the Rohirrim into the city and have them provided for. So he held his sword tight in his hand and trudged forward.

The trek down to the ruined gates of Minas Tirith was a long tedious one and Imrahil was thankful walking down the slope was easier than walking up. He reached the gates and found his other son conversing with a small group of Swan Knights. Elphir's shoulders were sagged, just like his brother's, from exhaustion.

The battle took a heavy toll on all of them. Many of the buildings, especially in the lowermost circles were in ruins. Fallen stones from catapults littered on the streets and buildings. The strong odour of ash and death filled the air. The sun shone, but its golden rays were turned brown through the haze of smoke. Carrions arrived, mostly like to feed off the carnage. The men worked quickly to cover their comrades' bodies from them. He finally reached the ruined gates. He saw that, among the small group of Swan Knights, there were others he did not recognise. Some were dressed like the Rangers of the North. And then one of them drew his eye, garbed in grey.

When the man turned to look at him, Imrahil thought he looked at the face of a ghost. He turned pale at the sight of him.

Imrahil looked at him from head to toe. He noted the stench of an unwashed male, the tiredness lining the man's features, the travel-stained grey garments, the beautifully forged sword hanging from his belt.

Then he punched his jaw.

Thorongil lurched to the side and before he stumbled, Imrahil grabbed him by his elbow and straightened him. Then he gruffly tidied his clothes that became askew.

The man laughed, and Imrahil found that deep within, he missed the regal nature of it. It was cultured, unlike the kind that usually belonged to hired swords. Imrahil pushed Thorongil's cloak back on his shoulders, his right hand stopping over the brooch with green-golden stone and its silver outspread wings of an eagle and smiled softly. Thorongil... It was truly him.

The man tolerated Imrahil's attention before he finally pushed him away.

"Enough," Thorongil said wryly. "I am unharmed."

"I wasn't looking for injuries." Imrahil answered immediately.

Thorongil harrumphed and only awarded him with a tolerable smile. Imrahil gnashed his teeth. Elphir opened his mouth in surprise. But Imrahil interrupted him before he spoke.

"Unfinished business," he explained to him shortly. "Go. I will speak to him."

"So how is your son?" Thorongil- Aragorn, asked him.

"Well," Imrahil answered shortly. Then he added, "And I have three sons."

Thorongil- Aragorn- raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Time has passed, it seems since I last visited Gondor." Aragorn said. Imrahil paused.

"We have all grown, Thorongil," Imrahil said softly. Aragorn looked around him and nodded soberly.

"Aye, we have. Too much, it seems to me," Aragorn answered shortly and they lapsed into silence. "My condolences on the loss of your dear sister, the Lady Finduilas," Aragorn said at last. Imrahil felt sharp pain lance through his chest and he nodded once tightly in acknowledgement. "When I saw her last, she was well. Her soft spirit clearly left a mark on her loved ones but she withered nevertheless against the shadow of Mordor."

"She is missed, every day in fact." Imrahil answered. They exchanged a look of understanding between themselves.

"If it is possible for you to offer some aid, I need help." Aragorn said.

"Of course!"

Imrahil led Aragorn wherever he needed to go. He lurked behind, watching the mysterious sellsword as he showed the kingly nature within that Imrahil found in him always.

At last, Imrahil pressed a hand on his shoulder, startling Aragorn.

"Come," he said quietly. "You have done more than enough. It is time for you to rest."

"Aye, but one last thing," Aragorn said. Imrahil was able to do nothing but follow him.

"You possess far too much life for one as old as you," Imrahil told Aragorn, leaning forward as they trudged up the slope towards the uppermost circle. Aragorn laughed over his shoulder.

"Come, I will not keep you too long from your bed, Imrahil!"

Aragorn led him to the throne room. Its floor was lined with black and white tiles of marble. Pillars lined on either side and statues stood between each pillar. The ceiling above was vaulted, with a skylight right on top of the king's throne and the Steward's chair. For a long while, Aragorn stood in silence in front of the two

chairs. Imrahil knew not why. At last, Aragorn looked back and offered him a tired smile.

"I expect it is time to retire. There is much to do and very little time."

"A wise choice," Imrahil said, slightly concerned for Aragorn's swaying figure.

Aragorn excused himself and Imrahil watched him go. The man was older over the years but then so was Imrahil. There was whiter in his hair and beard than there was long time ago. But many of his ways were still the same; the way he smiled, the way he walked or talked.

Imrahil looked back at the lone chair on the high platform, higher than that of the Steward. The skylight from the glazed windows above allowed some light on the throne.

"The King lives," Imrahil murmured. Somehow it brought hope to him.

He smiled.

oOo

Imrahil looked around the tent with thinly veiled displeasure.

"I am still not happy with this arrangement," Imrahil told his newly found liege-lord. Aragorn shook his head.

"I have made my decision clear. I am fine with staying in a tent, my old friend."

Imrahil was doubtful.

"I do not want you staying outside the city like some beggar clinging to the doorstep for scraps, Aragorn." Imrahil declared. But Aragorn shook his head.

"It is not the right time." Aragorn explained. "The people do not need a king, they need reinforcements. For now, that is all I am." Imrahil stared at him and reluctantly nodded.

Imrahil looked at Aragorn from his tired, dusty face and matted hair to his mud-stained, weather-tainted clothes and wrinkled his nose.

"Go and bathe. The Valar know you are in dire need of it."

Aragorn laughed at that. He began to undress and Imrahil turned his attention to the maps in order to give him some privacy.

"Have you any thoughts on what our next move shall be?" Imrahil asked, studying the border they shared with Mordor.

"Aye."

"And it is?"

"Bath and sleep."

Imrahil snorted and shook his head, a smile threatening to break loose. Thorongil may be called by another name but some things had not changed.

"You are still a fool." Imrahil said.

"At least now, in your mind, I am a trustworthy one. If you knew what I have in mind for our final stand, you would chain me in deepest forgotten hole you find in the dungeons of Minas Tirith."

"The thought crossed my mind multiple times since I first knew you," Imrahil muttered. He doubted Aragorn heard, for the King made no comment. He heard a rustle of cloth when the flap of the adjoining tent raised and fell and Aragorn was gone.

The sounds of water trickling and splashing in the bathtub filled the air. Idle, Imrahil browsed the tent. Aragorn's sword was sheathed and supported against the frame of the tent. Other than a cot and a small table, and a suit of armour on a mannequin the entire tent was sparse and empty. Imrahil shook his head wryly. Thorongil hated frivolities. He enjoyed a delicate taste and finery, true, but he was not impressed by the luxury of it. It seemed that was yet another thing that was unchanged of him.

There was a long slender post leaning against the main frame of the tent. At first, Imrahil thought it was a spear, until he noticed that the top part of it was wrapped with black cloth and clasped in place with toothed silver clasps. He reached it and took its shaft in his hand. The wood was smooth, polished and evenly curved. It was light brown in colour, probably belonging to a forest growing near the mountains. He reached up and unclasped the silver binding one by one. The cloth unravelled slowly until he tugged the last one free and it spilled over his hands. He sat down, cross-legged on the ground.

Imrahil lowered the post until the standard lay in folds across his lap. It was obviously woven with care. The weaving was tight but not so much as to make it stiff. It was soft to the touch but it felt slightly waxy, probably to save it from water.

"My betrothed made it," Aragorn's voice startled him. Imrahil's head shot up. Aragorn stood in front of him, his dressing gown draped around his body loosely. His hair was damp from his bath.

"Curse you and your silent feet," Imrahil said irritably. Aragorn laughed. He stood by Imrahil, leaning slightly over his shoulder. "It is beautiful work. Arwen certainly passed all expectations."

"Your mysterious lady love that gave you that brooch," Imrahil nodded towards the mannequin, a cloak pinned into place with a green-jewelled brooch.

"The Elfstone," Aragorn nodded. "I shall spare you its history for another day." Imrahil quirked a smile and nodded wordlessly. He looked around the tent.

"King of Gondor, indeed," Imrahil said. "If you survive, this will make a story worthy for fables."

His musings were answered by deep, calm breathing. Imrahil peered over his shoulder and found Thorongil sprawled over his cot, still in his dressing gown and fast asleep. Imrahil smiled and shook his head. He walked up to him and covered his frame with a blanket. He set Aragorn's sword within the reach of his arm, returned the post to its original place and silently left.

oOo

Statues lined the throne room. They were the only living replicas of kings long dead.

"I don't look like them," Aragorn mused. His hand reached his face and his fingers strokes trough his beard. "The Wild made my appearance more rugged and unrefined."

"Well, Gondor could do better with a scoundrel on the throne rather than an empty throne," Imrahil observed. Aragorn dropped his hand and laughed, clapping Imrahil on the shoulder. Aragorn turned and bounded up the steps flawlessly until he stood in front of the throne. A crown rested on a cushion of black velvet. Imrahil followed him slowly and watched him as he carefully lifted the crown.

He held up the crown. Aragorn's expression was thoughtful. Imrahil watched him. Did he wonder how it weighs? Was he worried that the crown brought a heavy burden and a heavier price?

"I hope the crown fits." Aragorn said at last. Imrahil scowled.

"I never knew you to be so vain," Imrahil remarked. Aragorn laughed.

"There are many things you do not know about me." Aragorn said smoothly.

"Thorongil, of the many things that you need to worry about, from a broken kingdom, a crippled army and an-"

From the slowly growing smile on Aragorn's face, Imrahil realised with horror that he fell right into Aragorn's neatly laid trap. Aragorn laughed as he set down the crown carefully on its resting place upon the black velvet.

"You are too easy," Aragorn said, chuckling. "Regardless, among that list of worries, is the overwhelming embarrassment of the crown is too small or large for my head."

The image of a king sitting embarrassed on a throne with his crown stuck on his head made him laugh.

"I suppose that is a poor way to start a reign."

Aragorn and Imrahil shared a laugh. It slowly faded into a silence.

"The pieces are set," Aragorn said soberly. His smile was gone. Imrahil's eyes flitted to Aragorn's belt, where a naked sword hung, free from its sheath. He heard that the King swore his sword would remain free until the war was won. It was a formidable vow to take.

To break it was considered tarnish to one's honour. "The players are in place. Let us see who wins in the end."

Imrahil looked from the King to the throne. He realised that there was a possibility that Aragorn may never sit upon the throne. He may die before the chance presented itself. The thought was a grave one.

"Whatever is the case, and whatever the future days bring, I will be honoured to fight alongside you again." Imrahil said. Aragorn smiled.

"As am I with you." He returned. "It will be like old times."

"Aye," Imrahil said. Then he paused. "Well, at least this time I will know truly who you are." Aragorn chuckled.

They clasped wrists in a silent promise.

oOo

The sounds of merrymaking refused to die away even when it was wee hours of the morning. Imrahil shook his head and excused himself from the celebrations. It was not long before he realised even Aragorn was gone.

He knew where Aragorn was. He returned to the Citadel and climbed up the stairs until he entered a maze of corridors.

The corridors grew steadily darker as he went higher, with a spare lit torch here and there to light his way. He finally reached an unused corridor, long-forgotten to many. But it was Ecthelion and Thorongil's favourite haunting. It was a long corridor, open from one side and built with arches and waist-high marble fence. The oil-covered blinds always remained rolled up and coiled to be unravelled when there was dense fog or rain. The pair always placed a chess set by the open side of the corridor and indulged in a game whenever they had the time.

True to his suspicion, he found a dark-haired, bearded figure standing by the fence. He leaned on a pillar supporting an arch, his body facing Imrahil and his head turned to peer outside. He was dressed handsomely, in blood-red tunic with black shirt and trousers. A silver tree with stars adorned the crimson tunic. Imrahil supposed he saw his friend rarely in such fine grabs. He always preferred his worn garments over any finery.

"I thought I might find you here." Imrahil called out to the dark figure. Aragorn turned sharply, but his tension disappeared when he saw who it was. Aragorn smiled and welcomed him with a small gesture. Imrahil smiled and walked up to him. As he grew closer, he saw that Aragorn stood beside a polished chessboard resting on a wooden table, two empty chairs on either side.

"I didn't expect to find this here." Aragorn said. His hand pointed at the chessboard and his wrist turned as he spoke. "I expected it to be long gone since I last met Ecthelion."

Imrahil smiled. Ecthelion had a love for chess. Aragorn entertained it whenever he was free. Ecthelion had the servants place the table

and chairs by the window, overlooking the city.

"I miss him," Aragorn said at last. He gestured at the empty chairs and untouched chess. "I left the last game of chess unfinished. Imrahil raised his eyebrows.

"Shall we?" Imrahil asked. Aragorn was surprised at his challenging voice.

"Are you sure?" Aragorn returned.

"Well, the pieces are set. All we need are players." Aragorn caught the hidden reference and chuckled. They took their places, facing one another. At one time or another they looked outside and admired the setting moon and fading stars.

Pawn took pawn, a castle took a pawn, and a knight took the healer and so on.

They sat together for a long time, enjoying the companionable silence and fresh breezy air. The night time sky lit up with dancing green and gold lights, weaving and separating from each other. Aragorn and Imrahil looked up in awe and wonder.

"Northern lights," Aragorn whispered. "They followed me home."

Imrahil smiled.

~S~

Author's Note:

A lot of readers asked me to confuse this little tale and I decided, "why not?" :)

I briefly considered adding it to the _"Northern Lights" _as its second chapter, but there is such a sense of finality to it, that I feared I was stretching it. :)

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed. Do leave a review!

End
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